

艾蕪：香港的一夜

One Night in Hong Kong

By Ai Wu

Translated by Zhu Zhiyu



Ai Wu in 1931

I HAD had many fine fantasies about Hong Kong, though I had never been there. This time on my way back to China, quite unexpectedly, in this Hong Kong which I had dreamed of so frequently, I became the recipient of special treatment by the English imperialists and stayed one night in a “government courtesy hotel”. The next morning, some local British mandarin dispatched a “yellow-skinned Westerner” to escort all of us who had enjoyed their hospitality the night before onto a ship departing for Amoy. And so in this manner, I said farewell to my long-dreamed-of Hong Kong. I felt an indescribable sadness, as if I had been forced to join the army the day after my wedding night!

Ai Wu (1908-) was deported from Rangoon in 1931 because his writings offended the British authorities there. This essay is collected in Piaobo zaji 飄泊雜記, which records his experiences in Southeast Asia.

I like travelling around but my favourite pastime is to visit a big city for the first time. Of course I love the vast blue sea and luxuriant mountain ranges, but still I can't forget those metropolises with their fine gentlemen and beautiful ladies. Before coming to Hong Kong, I often compared China to a loving mother and Hong Kong to her young daughter. At the mere thought of this I could hardly resist the temptation to see this gorgeous young lady. When our ship, which had sailed across the Indian Ocean, arrived that drizzly day at dusk, the lights burning up and down the mountains made this bejewelled debutante look even more refined and enticing. We were fed up with prison life in Burma; we had little tolerance for our fortnight's "exile" at sea. Hong Kong was the designated place where we were to be set free. If the English imperialists chose to open our cage here, this was where we would spread our wings and fly up into the sky of freedom; if they chose this place to set the fish free as a demonstration of their love for all creatures, then we would flap our fins and swim into the boundless sea! So, Hong Kong was nothing less than a symbol of freedom restored! Just imagine how these prisoners rejoiced when they saw the enticing figure of this Goddess of Liberty decked out in all her finery.

We were told that we could not go ashore till the English imperialists completed their inspection. All the criminal offenders and political prisoners from Southeast Asia before us were released this way. So we had to wait. Leaning on the rails we waited until late at night when a few English policemen, who had been drinking with the ship's owner, arrived with a set of identification photos provided by the government of Burma. They checked each of us against the photos, and then, without a word, took us ashore in an electric boat. We were herded into a police station which was about as comfortable as a pigsty, and quite unceremoniously slammed in the clink. With no hope of being freed now, we all fell into the abyss of misery.

As we peered around inside, a sixteen-watt bulb illuminated six prisoners sleeping on the floor in the fifteen-square-metre cell. When we were told to enter, they all woke up with a start and looked up at us, revealing heads swollen with dropsy. With the two of us, there was scarcely enough space for everyone to sit down. In one corner stood a tin night-soil bucket. A large section of the floor around it was soaking wet, obviously with urine that had spilled from the bucket. There were also a couple of banana-shaped turds lying there conspicuously in the middle of the floor. The room stunk of a mixture of acrid disinfectant and fragrant piss and shit, and struck us new-comers as being quite out of this world. It was terrible on the other side of the bars too: the December wind was howling away outside, in a ghastly and blood-curdling way. An Indian cop wearing a black jacket was pacing back and forth with a rifle on his shoulder; he looked like the shadow of a ghost. Frustrated and angry, all of us started cursing out loud: Foreign devils! F___ your mother! Red-headed barbarians!

Our detention house in Burma was a lot better than this place in Hong Kong. There at least you were fed a meal upon arrival, and got a blanket at bedtime. The room was spacious and there was fresh air to breathe. There was a Western-style toilet: one pull of the rope, and all the filth and stink was flushed to hell. But

in Hong Kong no one gave a damn if you were hungry when you got there or cold at night. In place of a toilet, you were provided with a night-soil bucket, as if prisoners were expected to enjoy the fragrance of piss and shit. "The red-headed barbarians treat us Chinese worse than slaves!" We all said things like this as a result of what we had gone through.

Later we talked to those six prisoners. They told us that they had been sent back to Hong Kong by the colonial government in Singapore because they were unemployed there, and had been here for a couple of days already. Does that make sense? Is it a crime to be unemployed? Sending them home would be enough, but on top of that they were locked up in a pigsty. Are the laws of this self-professed civilized country so cruel? It is thanks to the sweat and blood of these honest unemployed labourers that the Malay Peninsula and the Straits Settlements enjoy their current prosperity, providing those ungrateful imperialist pigs and dogs with a comfortable life. And in the end, these labourers were expelled by the thousands. The few of us who had been banished and sent back to China perhaps deserved the special treatment we were receiving at the Hong Kong government's free lodgings

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Prisoner flanked by Sikh policemen.

photo: Hong Kong Museum
of History

because we had ostensibly committed crimes, by either exposing in writing the sinister designs of the English imperialists in their deception and oppression of small and weak nations, or by digging a deep grave for British imperialism through some form of direct action. But what crime had been committed by these innocent unemployed workers that they should be treated like prisoners?

The next morning before I got up, I heard the sounds of my fellow prisoners taking turns moving their bowels in the bucket. The fetid stench in the room intensified. All this made me feel even sadder. All you could do was clench your teeth and silently curse the English imperialists.

It was not until breakfast time that the door was opened and we were allowed into the courtyard. The Indian guard was very nice indeed, and motioned to me to come over and talk with him. Fortunately, I could speak a little Hindustani (the *lingua franca* of India), so that I managed to carry on a conversation with him, using English to fill in the gaps. The Indian policeman was so pleased to find someone who could speak his native tongue that he became even more amicable. Later that day the Hong Kong government moved us to another prison before putting us on a ship bound for Amoy, and it was there that I met another Indian policeman. We tried to get close to him, and at parting he gave us a salute and said, "*Salaam, Babu,*" (an expression of respect for a superior). There we also met two Indian prisoners, who looked like well-educated men. They told us they had worked for the Labour Department in the British Concession in Shanghai. They were on their way back to Calcutta since they had been expelled from Shanghai, perhaps for political reasons. We wanted to take advantage of this rare opportunity to speak with them more, but we had very little time, as we were soon taken to our respective ships under escort.

So this is how I said good-bye to my beloved Hong Kong, with anger and sadness. The deepest impression I am left with of Hong Kong is the cruelty of imperialism and the unbearable stink of the night-bucket! This I will never forget.

When the ship had travelled a good distance, there seemed to be a low, plaintive call coming from the direction of the Colony. "Will those who love me please forgive me? I'm being raped by the British imperialists!"